Aan vorst en vaderland gehecht, doch tevreden zijn zij niet : Limburgse politici in Den Haag 1839-1918

Summary

Attached to Sovereign and Fatherland, yet they are not satisfied

Limburg politicians in The Hague 1839–1918

After the return of their province to the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1839, many inhabitants of Limburg felt themselves more or less like strangers within the Dutch state, religiously, culturally and economically. As Limburg at that time largely became part of the German Confederation – and remained so until 1867 – the development of Dutch national feelings was hampered. This ambiguous position, balancing between the Dutch state and the German Confederation, was illustrated by Jan Lodewijk baron van Scherpenzeel Heusch who in 1848 was elected as member of the Second Chamber of the States-General in The Hague and at the same time was a representative in the German National Assembly in Frankfurt am Main.

In 1864, Johan Rudolf Thorbecke – liberal foreman and at that time Leader of the Cabinet – condemned the way certain Limburg Members of Parliament behaved during the debate. In his opinion they had a purely provincial approach. Instead of promoting the interests of their own province, they, being members of the national parliament, were supposed to represent the entire Dutch population, as stated in the constitution. Therefore, the label Limburg representative wouldn't do, as Thorbecke said. The main question of this book is whether the Limburg members of the States-General dissociated themselves from their colleges in parliament, as Thorbecke seems to have suggested. Did they indeed form a separate group and did they operate as such, looking at their background and political behaviour? This dissertation focuses on the position the Limburg Members of Parliament (the two chambers of the States-General) took in Dutch politics: their political loyalties as well as their attitude towards the Dutch nation state. The period under investigation covers the years between 1839, when Limburg again became part of the Dutch kingdom, and 1918, when the first Limburger, Charles Ruijs de Beerenbrouck, was appointed Prime Minister: an event that may be considered as an indication that the integration of the province within the national political system in the meantime had made major progress.

According to the historiography regarding Dutch parliamentary history, absence and reticence seem to have been two prominent characteristics of the behaviour of

Limburg deputies in the States-General. Indeed, on average, their rate of attendance appears to have been lower than that of their colleagues, as chapter 2 demonstrates. And minutes of the parliamentary sessions show that some of the Limburgers in The Hague did not hold public speeches at all during their membership of parliament. For instance, Louis Libert de Villers de Pité, who was a member of the States-General for more than thirty years, never said a word in the plenary assembly. Not all Limburg representatives conform to this: the presence of some of them exceeded the national average. Moreover, there were Limburg Members of Parliament who were renowned for their verbal quality. So we may conclude that it was at least not participation that clearly distinguished Limburg representatives as a group from their colleagues in parliament, although this has been suggested by the press of that time as well as by later historical literature.

Neither can they be identified as a separate group when we look at their social-economical background, their age and education. Although for the last thirty years (1888–1918) their level of education was below average. This was part of a pattern that was characteristic for emancipation parties in general, in Limburg the Catholic 'party'. Whereas the influence of the nobility in the Dutch Parliament, generally speaking, diminished over the years – at least in the later years of the period under investigation – the share Limburg aristocrats, mostly descending from the southern part of the province, took in the Limburg deputation in The Hague, remained almost constant. Only between April 1888 and July 1889 were none of the representatives of noble birth.

The election campaigns and their results amply illustrate that the label Limburg representative applied as far as the bond between representatives and province is concerned (see chapter 2). Candidates from outside the province were rare and had to reckon with resistance as they were considered to be strangers. With one exception, they all had ties with Limburg through birth or residence. The big exception was Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, who was chosen in the constituency of Maastricht in 1853 and 1856. In this respect, Limburg differed markedly from the other mainly Catholic province in the Netherlands: Noord-Brabant. On more than one occasion this province elected Catholic politicians who were born in the northern parts of the country and still resided there.

One could even go a step further. Limburg voters seem to have had a strong preference for representatives from their own region within the province. Evidently, the inhabitants and voters of Limburg made a sharp distinction between the separate parts of their province. Following the same pattern, the Provincial States of Limburg took great care for a proportional geographic distribution of representatives when electing the members of the First Chamber of parliament. Although feelings of attachment to the province gradually became stronger during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, localism – a deep attachment to the local community – remained an important characteristic of political and cultural life in Limburg until the end of the period 1839–1918.

According to many, in the rest of the country as well as in the province itself, the integration of Limburg in the Dutch nation state was problematic. At least three times the so-called Limburg question, by which the (unequivocal) Dutch status of the province was disputed, became urgent and was therefore put high on the political agenda (see chapter 3). During the 40s, many inhabitants of Limburg still hoped their province would return to the Kingdom of Belgium or would be incorporated into a new German empire. In 1843–1844 and in 1848–1849 a separation movement played an active role in Limburg. With the failure of the German unification, the question faded away, but in 1863 it re-appeared when the German Confederation became involved in a war with Denmark over Schleswig, a duchy which belonged to the Confederation and found itself more or less in the same position as Limburg. Many Dutch feared that through the ties Limburg had with the German Confederation, their country could become involved in a European conflict. The crisis lasted until 1867 when the German Confederation was dissolved as a result of the war between its two main members, Prussia and Austria. Finally, the third time the Dutch status of Limburg became a political topic was at the end of World War I, due to Belgian territorial claims.

From the start, a clear majority among the Limburg parliamentarians was in favour of the integration of their province into the Dutch kingdom. This is all the more remarkable for the period 1840–1850 when many inhabitants of Limburg, in contrast with the later period, advocated a separation. So Limburg Members of Parliament hardly represented popular sentiment, at least not in the first decade after Limburg returned to the Netherlands. This was partly due to the electoral system, which was to the advantage of those groups within the Limburg society that wanted to remain Dutch, especially the higher classes in the cities. Moreover, the Dutch authorities, in particular the Governor in Maastricht, did not hesitate to intervene in elections in order to promote pro-Dutch candidates. As already became clear during the period of the united kingdom (1815–1830, see chapter 1), when the Netherlands and Belgium were united in one state, certain parts of the Limburg elite were willing to accept the ties with the northern parts of the Netherlands. It was especially from among this group that Governor and government after 1839, many times successfully, tried to recruit candidates for membership of the States-General.

Apart from the effects of the electoral system and the interventions on the part of the Dutch authorities, national parliament itself was hardly a suitable place to express separatist sentiments. Since representatives were obliged to take an oath of allegiance to the constitution of the kingdom, they were supposed to behave as patriots. It is therefore not surprising that we can find only one occasion (in August 1848) on which a Limburg member of the States-General, Clemens baron de Weichs de Wenne, asked the government in clear – but still diplomatic – terms to consider a separate administration for Limburg.

During the discussions about the national status of Limburg, deputies from this province were regularly labelled Limburg representative, by themselves as well as by others. Even Limburg parliamentarians who strongly resisted secession, referred to

themselves as such. However, since they opposed separation, these representatives were not condemned for adopting a parochial approach. The reason is simple: arguments against secession clearly made the deepest impression if expressed by deputies who came from the disputed territory itself.

To resist separation of Limburg did not automatically imply devotion to the Netherlands. For instance Arnold Hendrik Michiels van Verduynen (Baron since 1841, member of the Second Chamber between 1840 and 1846) was first and above all a loyal servant to his King and to the dynasty of Orange-Nassau. He was not alone on this. According to some, separation from the Netherlands didn't have to mean a separation from this dynasty – as the example of Luxemburg already demonstrated. That's why Michiels van Verduynen could combine his separatist ideas with his attachment to the King, at least at the beginning. This combination proved to be problematic, when King William II asked him to restrain his support to activities of the separation movement.

Even Limburg Members of Parliament who were loyal to the monarchy or fatherland, or to both, were not always content with the way they felt their province was treated by the Dutch authorities. As Gerard Johan de Rijk, member of the First Chamber, put it during a debate in 1849: 'The people of Limburg are Dutchmen attached to Sovereign and Fatherland, yet they are not satisfied.' Even in the twentieth century many Limburg politicians still felt their province was discriminated against. A pointed case was the policy of taxation, which was one of the main targets of their criticism.

Taxation was indeed a major issue for the Limburg Members of Parliament, as chapter 5 concludes. No other subject was discussed by as many Limburg deputies in The Hague. Generally speaking, their complaint was that Dutch taxes were disproportionately divided and weighted to heavy upon their province. This was particularly so because until the end of the nineteenth century there was no tax on capital (e.g. shares) whereas the property of real estate was taxed. Since the possession of shares was relatively rare among the inhabitants of Limburg, who preferred to invest in real estate, they felt at a serious disadvantage compared to people in other parts of the country.

In many debates on the system of taxation, Limburg representatives could be distinguished from their colleagues in parliament by their parochial attitude, openly advocating the interests of their province. Certainly in these cases the label Limburg representative was justified. Matters were further complicated by the constant attacks on the exceptional system for taxation on real estate especially designed for Limburg. This system existed for almost thirty years (until 1869) and outside Limburg many thought it was a relatively mild and therefore profitable regime. Its abolition was therefore an ever occurring subject on the parliamentarian agenda. This compelled the Limburg delegates to defend the interests of their province, setting them apart from their colleagues.

The pressure to advocate provincial interests was intensified by public opinion in Limburg, which expressed a strong desire for a fundamental change in the tax

system – which meant charging capital too. Until the 70s, the Provincial States also took an active part in these protests against the current state of affairs, being much more involved in discussions on national taxation than the legislative assemblies of other provinces. These signals couldn't be ignored by the Limburg Members of Parliament: if they wanted to be re-elected they would have to manifest themselves clearly as Limburg representatives in The Hague.

Although Limburg Members of Parliament were usually close to the Liberals, and their foreman Thorbecke in particular, until 1863, the taxation issue put this bond under great pressure (see chapter 4). At the elections of 1864, a provincial opposition movement, the so-called Limburg opposition, emerged which turned away from this national alliance as it was considered to be in the way of Limburg interests. The Roman question formed another factor in the removal between the Liberals and the Limburg politicians: whereas the Liberals applauded the unification of Italy into one nation state, Limburg representatives felt disturbed by the restriction this new state placed upon papal sovereignty.

In their resistance against the Liberals, the Limburg opposition sided with the Conservatives in parliament. However, they did not constitute a firm alliance. Apart from the fact that the Conservatives failed to build up a real party or well-organised movement, ideological differences remained important and could only be overcome in matters where Limburg representatives and Conservatives were confronted with their common opponent, the Liberals. With the activities of the Limburg opposition, a period began in which the Limburg Members of Parliament were less strongly allied with politicians from other parts of the country than before.

In the 80s the Catholic co-operation in Dutch politics became apparent and the Limburgers participated in this new collaboration. Although the Catholics worked together, they still differed on important issues. On items like suffrage and the social question they disagreed and so did the Limburg representatives among them. At the same time this incorporation into the Catholic parliamentary group did not mean that Limburg representatives did not feel the urge anymore to look after the specific interests of their province. Whenever these interests were threatened, they did not hesitate to dissociate themselves from their Catholic colleagues in parliament. On such occasions the Limburg Catholics became Catholic Limburgers.

Nevertheless it was through this Catholic co-operation at national level that the Limburg politicians gained access to the centre of political power in the Netherlands. The process in which Dutch politics became national and ideological of character and which took place during the second half of the nineteenth century, did not only include the Limburg politicians, they even took an active part in it. And at the end of the period under investigation, it was politicians from Limburg who held two of the most important political offices: Charles Ruijs de Beerenbrouck was Prime Minister and Willem Nolens was Chairman of the most numerous group in the Second Chamber of the States-General, the Catholic group. Although the Queen still had to get used to the idea of having a Catholic and a Limburger as her Prime

Minister, Nolens had no doubts about the position of a Limburg politician: he himself felt Dutch and, as he told his colleagues in 1919, he would not like to see his parliamentary seat transferred to Brussels. He felt at home in the Dutch Parliament.